For FBI Director, a Clash of Loyalties

Bureau Officials Trace Sessions's Troubles to His Wife, Key Aide

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John Otto, acting FBI director, urgently wanted to talk to the man appointed to lead the bureau for the next 10 years, William S. Sessions. Although Sessions was ill, Otto felt the matter was so important he had to bother him at home in San Antonio in October 1987.

But first he had to get by Alice Sessions, who seemed to want him to "communicate through her." She was upset about the invitations to be sent out for her husband's swearing-in. "The FBI reminds me of the gang who couldn't shoot straight," she told Otto.

"That's enough!" Otto said he retorted. "I will not talk to you anymore about any official business." According to Alice Sessions, he added: "We don't need a wife running the FBI. If you want that, you can stay in San Antonio."

That was how Alice Sessions and the FBI top brass met 5½ years ago. It has been downhill ever since.

The combination has been like oil and water. But the director, eager for his wife to play a role at the bureau, keeps trying to mix them, letting her negotiate with the highest-ranking officials on issues such as FBI security for their home. An equally big problem for the director, until her firing last month, was his executive assistant Sarah W. Munford, who sources said was viewed within headquarters as Alice Sessions's pipeline and agent.

Alice Sessions said in an interview late Saturday that "the old-boy network" at the bureau simply cannot accept strong-minded women. "They've never really had a director with a wife," she said. "They've never had a woman executive there."

To bureau officials, however, the trouble was not women per se but the license the director gave the two.

Sessions frequently is described

See FBI, A12, Col. 1

Director's Wife, Aide Blamed Within FBI

FBI, From A1

by bureau officials as a decent man who would not, for his own purposes, try to cheat the government or misuse his office. But he seemed incapable of standing up to his wife and executive assistant when they trampled FBI procedures and collided with management, these officials said. His personal loyalties deafened him to warnings from aides who were troubled by what they saw as improprieties, they said.

"Alice and Sarah dug his grave," said one high-ranking bureau official. "He handed them the shovel and climbed in it."

Even this is a charitable view of Sessions within the bureau. In refusing to accept last month's findings by the Justice Department's Office of Professional Responsibility that he engaged in a pattern of misconduct, Sessions has convinced some FBI officials that he himself disdains the FBI rules. "I've seen this before with him," said one senior FBI official. "He just cannot admit he has done anything wrong."

Sessions's defense on some allegations, such as giving unauthorized people rides in FBI vehicles, has underscored an impression in the bureau that what he cares most about is the social dimension of his job.

What is worse, FBI officials said, is that he has turned on the organization itself, questioning the loyalty of Deputy FBI Director Floyd I. Clarke and the quality of the FBI's own ethics investigators, who assisted the Justice Department in its inquiry. Some field supervisors said in interviews that they were outraged when Sessions gave congressional oversight committees a letter from a supporter who praised him for fighting FBI "Hooverites" and Justice Department "neo-Nazis."

Yesterday, Vice President Gore

BY RICH LIPSKI—THE WASHINGTON POST

William and Alice Sessions embrace at his 1987 swearing-in as FBI director.

held out a ray of hope for Sessions, saying former attorney general William P. Barr might have been trying to punish Sessions for pledging to carry out an independent investigation of how prosecutors handled a politically sensitive bank fraud case. "For those and other reasons we owe him a fair review of the allegations," Gore said.

Sessions's lawyers, in hopes of showing the report is deeply biased, have collected statements from several individuals who claim OPR misquoted them or omitted information favorable to Sessions. One of them, former Sessions aide John McKay, said in an interview that OPR wrongly reported that he believed Sessions changed his duties because he supported a type of yard fence that Alice Sessions opposed.

Two FBI pilots dispute a footnote in the OPR report that suggests Sessions refueled an FBI plane in Fort Smith, Ark., in order to visit his father. The pilots said they themselves chose the Fort Smith airport when bad weather forced them to change their flight plan.

In addition, former independent counsel Whitney North Seymour Jr., a friend of Sessions, said in an affidavit that OPR exaggerated an incident involving the use of FBI security agents to load wood for the Sessionses. Seymour said the firewood put in a car trunk amounted to three or four pieces of decomposed white birch.

Yet even if Sessions can prove some details of the OPR report are wrong, he must overcome the growing perception even among his supporters that his own organization scorns him and wants him out. That is a formidable task for a man appointed by the departed president of a party now out of power.

Sessions's problems over his wife's role began almost as soon as he was nominated, with the arrangements for his swearing-in and reception. Alice Sessions said her husband instructed Milt Ahlerich, then an assistant FBI director in charge of congressional and public affairs, to consult with her and Munford in compiling an invitation list for his swearing-in.

Alice Sessions said Ahlerich "would never work with us" and that Otto took Ahlerich's side, although Otto said he did not try to resolve the dispute. Ahlerich, now a special agent in charge of the New Haven, Conn., field office, said yesterday, "That is absolutely not true. I did work with her extensively. We did everything possible to accommodate the Sessionses' guest list."

That conflict continued after the FBI director took office in November 1987, mainly over questions of when Alice Sessions should accompany her husband on official trips, as she did about a third of the time. FBI sources said Alice Sessions was deeply upset when Ahlerich persuaded the director to leave her behind on one particularly sensitive trip. Some FBI officials speculated that was why Sessions later diminished Ahlerich's responsibilities. Sessions has denied that, sources said.

The director's own travel also quickly became a sore point. FBI managers said that under normal procedures, an invitation to Sessions would be reviewed by a number of aides to decide whether it was worthy of his time. But officials said Munford obtained the invitations before they could be circulated. FBI officials said that with her input, and possibly that of his wife, Sessions decided which to accept.

His choices baffled some aides, who said he accepted invitations that typically would have been routed to a field supervisor. OPR said it found an improper pattern of trips to cities where Sessions's children live, and Barr characterized as "trivial" the official events used to justify those trips.

On the issue of security for their home, Alice Sessions tussled with both Clarke, whom Sessions promoted as the No. 2 FBI official, and Weldon Kennedy, now associate deputy director. Alice Sessions said Clarke "threatened" her and that he and Kennedy together humiliated her during a meeting over what type of fence to erect.

"I was attacked," she said, tears filling her eyes. "Verbally. About being an embarrassment to the FBI, and how I needed to mind my mouth. . . . I was harassed, I was degraded, about things they knew nothing about."

Clarke declined to comment yesterday. But FBI sources said the two officials, forced by Sessions to negotiate with his wife, tried only to convince her that the bureau could not pay for a privacy fence. Barr has since ordered Sessions to reimburse the FBI nearly $10,000 for the fence that was built, after OPR found it did not meet security requirements.

Some of the longest-running conflicts occurred over how the director and his wife treated FBI security agents and used an armor-plated limousine and other FBI vehicles. OPR said the couple used the security agents as an escort service to cart furniture and take Alice Sessions on personal errands. FBI sources said she once asked a security agent to pack her clothes for a trip.

The FBI director said in an interview that agents sometimes may have volunteered to help. Alice Sessions said OPR magnified the smallest incidents into "a capital case," portraying her so falsely "I don't even recognize myself."

"You know what people call this around Washington?" she said. "They call it bizarre."